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How Should Jesuit Universities Respond to the Repeal of DACA?

By Rachel Wifall

In a 2017 study conducted for the finance website WalletHub.com, Jersey City, N.J., was declared the nation's most diverse city, based on ethnoracial, linguistic, and birthplace data. According to Mayor Steven Fulop, "Jersey City has always been a welcoming home for new groups seeking a better life, bringing a diversity of cultures, religions, and languages here, which is truly the embodiment of the promise of America." Accordingly, Saint Peter's University in Jersey City appears on the *U.S. News and World Report* "Best Colleges" list for diversity (2016-17), with 42 percent of its students of Hispanic origin. In order to serve these

students, Saint Peter's has created both an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and The Center for Undocumented Students (TCUS), housed in the King-Kairos Social Justice House.

When the Trump administration ended the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, Saint Peter's University President Eugene J. Cornacchia is-



Jennifer Ayala, director of The Center for Undocumented Students, TCUS, is pictured here in a meeting with staff and volunteers for the center.

Photo courtesy of Corey W. McDonald, *The Jersey Journal*

sued a statement inspired by the words of Pope Francis: "The Church without frontiers, Mother to all, spreads throughout the world a culture of acceptance and solidarity, in which no one is seen as useless, out of place or disposable." Dr. Cornacchia assured the university community that Saint Peter's will not consider immigration status in the admission

and financial-aid process, will never inquire about a student's immigration status, and will not share any personal data with anyone without a warrant or a subpoena. The volunteer-driven Center for Undocumented Students and the social justice program, often in conjunction with the Office of Campus Ministry and community organizations, in-



The King-Kairos Social Justice House at Saint Peter's University in Jersey City.

creased their efforts on behalf of the immigrant student population, hosting licensed professionals who provided pro-bono counseling sessions and immigration lawyers who offered free "Know Your Rights" workshops. The groups have also provided staff and faculty training regarding the special needs of undocumented students, as well as student-led vigils, marches, and phone-banking marathons.

While undocumented students cannot obtain federal loans or grants, "Li" – an immigrant from Mexico and a 2017 graduate – was able to attend Saint Peter's through the generosity of anonymous donors who set up a Dreamer Scholarship Fund. He felt protected by the Saint Peter's community and his DACA status. However, "After Trump was elected, it sunk in that I was living my last year as a student and that

the protections that came with being a 'dreamer' student would not apply anymore; I would become an undocumented adult." Li asserts that we need to find a way to provide real sanctuary for undocumented people beyond the "Dreamers." Jennifer Ayala, professor of education and director of TCUS, agrees that we must also reach out to nonstudent members of our community, perhaps in conjunction with local churches.

Anna Brown, associate professor of political science and director of the social justice program, warns against "resting on our Jesuit laurels," assuming that because we are Jesuit institutions we are automatically on the side of the oppressed and need not take strong measures to confirm our commitment to justice. Like Dr. Cornacchia, she cites Pope Francis, who encourages us to "honor human dignity, build

solidarity, and create a culture of encounter" and ask ourselves one of the oldest of all questions: "Where is your brother?" In the August 2017 issue of *Conversations*, John McKay encourages all Jesuit universities to declare their campuses sanctuaries for their students and "send a powerful message of support when [it] is most needed." As for further measures, perhaps we should follow the example of Vince Boudreau, interim president of City College of New York, who called for action including demonstrations, pressuring elected officials, and learning the "rules of engagement with immigration officials."

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